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Cairo Art Blog: Connecting Egyptian visual artists to the world

New on-line platform to promote the work of young emerging Egyptian artists

Yasmine Zohdi, Monday 14 Oct 2013

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'A Battle' by Hend El Falafly, one of the artists featured on Cairo Art Blog (Photo: Cairo Art Blog)



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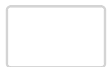
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[Cairo Art Blog](#) is a new non-profit platform, created to highlight some of Egypt's most promising emerging visual artists, and seeking to connect them to galleries, curators and collectors within the international art community.

The website, which launched late September, was founded by Yasmine Allam, who has been working in public relations for years, and Aida Nasr, who has an extensive background in journalism and is currently the editor of the blog.

“The idea first came to us in 2011, after the revolution, when we noticed the explosion of creativity that took place,” says Allam to Ahram Online.

Combining their knowledge of PR and journalism, Allam and Nasr got in touch with several artists, collected information and images, and started to create a database.

The website currently features mini biographies of selected artists, images of their work, and coverage of different exhibitions and art events taking place in Cairo.

“I’ve always loved art, but whenever I was interested in the work of a specific young artist in Egypt and tried to look them up online, it was incredibly difficult to find any information. There were scattered bits and pieces; one article here, another there... More often than not, the artist would tell you not to rely on these published articles because they contain inaccurate information or they don't represent them fully,” said Allam.

“When galleries and curators work with artists they often seek to impose their own

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narratives on the work of these young practitioners, representing them in a particular light that fits their overall exhibition, or curatorial concept. This is not necessarily how the artist sees him or herself; so we choose to let the artists describe their work in the way that they perceive it," Allam says of the blog.

Although [Cairo Art Blog](#) was established to promote the work of young Egyptian artists, its creators maintain it is not a PR project. "I am merely using my experience in PR to deliver it," Allam clarifies.

Cairo Art Blog is a non-profit enterprise. "We are not seeking to introduce money-generating aspects to the project, and the website will not feature advertisements," Allam asserts, explaining it is her love for art and Egypt that motivated the creation of the blog.

"In different ways, the emerging artists featured on the website reflect where Egypt is at right now; they are like the beating pulse of this country," she explains.

"The media in Egypt is usually concerned with older, more established artists, but younger artists are often more in tune with the current reality of the country. They tackle big issues, like politics and gender for example, in fresh ways that differ markedly from the work of their older peers."

Allam considers young artists to be in a unique position, which gives their work a distinctive edge. "They are the heirs, or beneficiaries, of seven thousand years of history, while also standing on the cusp of the future, witnessing firsthand the historic, social and political changes shaping their country. This is a unique vantage point that lends itself to some very interesting artistic expressions," she elaborates.

Allam says they intend to write about the artists in English, in order to make Egyptian art accessible to larger audiences around the world. "There is so little information available about these artists for a wider international audience, yet they really have something to say. We wanted to try to plug that gap - or at least, we wanted to help international audiences

discover the brilliant work that is being produced by them.”

Allam believes the biggest challenge Egyptian visual-artists face is the lack of proper branding, packaging and promotion.

“It’s a shame that we have such unbelievable potential here that never gets the exposure it deserves outside of Egypt,” she says. “Why do you think Iranian art is making a buzz? Why is the contemporary art movement in Saudi Arabia starting to cause such a stir? Not because they have better artists than we do, but because they emphasise the promotion of their art abroad.”

Allam thinks Cairo Art Blog is beginning to show signs of success in doing the same for Egyptian art. “We have already received many emails from galleries and curators in different countries, and our role is merely to put them in touch with the artists they are interested in,” she says. “This is what gives Cairo Art Blog value, not my work or Aida’s; it’s the work of the artists, we only try to present them in the best way possible.”

Allam tells the story of Ahmed Kassem, an Egyptian visual artist who, along with a group of his peers, including Ibrahim Dessouky, managed to collect money and rent a gallery space right in the heart of the Venice Biennale, where they displayed their art during the prestigious international event, without actually being on the official calendar. “To the artists’ great surprise, their impromptu exhibition received a huge number of visitors. Collectors bought their work and although it wasn’t actually part of the Biennale it was added to the official event guide,” she enthuses. “This highlights what Cairo Art Blog is all about; when Egyptian artists get the chance to be seen, they are a sensation. This is why we have to do everything possible to make that happen.”

Allam recounts another story that gives them even more confidence in the ability of Egyptian artists to carve out a niche for themselves on the international scene. “The head of one of the UK’s art colleges sent us a message saying that she makes her students follow Cairo Art Blog, so that they can see how young people their age in Egypt are creating

beautiful art that they unfortunately know nothing about,” she recounts excitedly.

Allam says it is admirable that most Egyptian artists have worked really hard during the last few years of political instability. “I sense that perhaps they’ve found even more inspiration after the revolution. All the artists I’ve dealt with so far have been incredibly busy! They’re producing like mad and we should celebrate that,” she says. “So much art is coming out of Egypt, yet if I am a curator in Paris or someone putting together a show in Dubai, I may not always hear of these artists in order to contact them. This is where we are seeking to intervene.”

The artists featured on Cairo Art Blog are selected based on recommendations by a board of consultants made up of leading Egyptian artists and international curators, all working on a volunteer basis. The artist must already be exhibiting. “We think it says a lot about an artist that they’ve managed to exhibit their work independently with minimum support, especially at a young age.”

All of the artists currently featured on Cairo Art Blog are young; some of them – like Malak El-Shazly – are in their early twenties. Allam says the blog is yet to expand in order to include other artists and a more diverse range of artistic styles. “We will have more contributing writers so we can cover more artists. We want Cairo Art Blog to be a space where Egyptians discover and talk about their art scene.”

Allam says she is very optimistic. “This might still be embryonic, but it’s bound to grow. I think young, Egyptian artists are excellent, and, judging from the response we are getting to our posts, audiences outside of Egypt agree. They definitely have a wonderful future ahead of them, and so does this country,” she concludes.

Visit Cairo Art blog [here](#)